

The California Conservation Corps –
A 35-Year Legacy of Service and Hard Work

By Jared Huffman

It's difficult to take advantage of the environmental bounty we have in Marin and Sonoma Counties without marveling at the handiwork of one of state government's most enduring success stories – the California Conservation Corps, which is celebrating its 35th anniversary this fall.

Throughout California's state park system, thousands of dedicated young men and women are hard at work right now making your visit more enjoyable. At Angel Island and along Bootjack Trail at Mt. Tamalpais State Park, you'll see corpsmembers honing their outdoor skills while building and repairing sustainable and environmentally sound trails for outdoor enthusiasts.

For these 18- to 25-year-olds – many of whom come from Marin and Sonoma counties – trail building and environmental conservation is the easy part. Since the CCC's inception in 1976, corpsmembers have toiled, selflessly protecting California residents from natural disasters. They've fought forest fires in the Sierra and helped hold back raging floodwaters in the foothills. They've cleaned up coastal oil spills and helped eradicate such agricultural pests as the glassy-winged sharpshooter.

What do they get in return? The late B. T. Collins, CCC director in the late 1970s and 1980s, famously said the corpsmembers' rewards are "hard work, low pay, miserable

conditions...and more.” From Eureka to San Diego, corpsmembers wouldn’t have it any other way. Earning minimum wage? No problem. These young men and women learn about service and sacrifice. They learn to love California and all it has to offer, and they learn a little something about themselves, as well.

For some, it’s the discipline and guidance to complete coursework necessary to secure a high school diploma. For others, it’s easing their transition to the labor force by expanding their skills in firefighting or environmental conservation, including weatherization and the installation of solar projects. Working with California’s community colleges, the CCC’s Careers Pathways program offers targeted work experience, education and training.

The CCC also works closely with Conservation Corps North Bay, the first local nonprofit conservation corps in California located in my assembly district. For nearly 30 years, the partnership between the CCC and Conservation Corps North Bay has enhanced the quality of life for Marin and Sonoma County residents and has been a model for conservation corps programs throughout the state.

A couple highlights:

- Since 1976, corpsmembers have provided more than 65 million hours of natural resource work – planting more than 20 million trees, improving nearly 2,000 miles of streams and fish habitat, building or maintaining 9,000 miles of trails and improving park and recreation areas.
- Corpsmembers have spent more than nine million hours of dedicated work in just about every large emergency – often working 12 hours a day for up to 14 days at a time to save homes and businesses.

Programs must evolve to meet changes in society. One such exciting example is the CCC's newest program, which has been earning nationwide publicity and praise. The Veterans Backcountry Trails Program employs veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan to construct and maintain trails in California's national parks and wilderness areas. Veterans are returning from overseas assignments to an uncertain job market and little transition support. The returning service men and women selected for this backcountry crew receive training that could prepare them for forestry and firefighting jobs while helping ease their transition back to civilian life.

As the CCC begins its 36th year, it's worth remembering that the lives of 115,000 men and women – as well as untold thousands of Californians – have been positively impacted by this remarkable organization. It set the standard for helping make youth part of the solution to our communities' problems. It serves as a surrogate family for youth and an incredible on-the-job education for others. It paved the way for the 13 local/nonprofit corps programs like Conservation Corps North Bay. And, the CCC has become a national model and, as yet, an unmatched example of a state program done the right way.

Assemblymember Jared Huffman (D-San Rafael) represents the 6th Assembly District, which encompasses southern Sonoma County and all of Marin County. First elected in 2006, Huffman chairs the Assembly Water, Parks and Wildlife Committee and also serves as Co-Chair of the Legislative Environmental Caucus.